Memorial of the Rev. O. B. Wilson

T. H. Rice

BX9225
.W557
R53

CARREL LOAN
For Library Use only!

*
MI
1.9
W751
R

M E M O R I A L

OF THE

REV. O. B. W I L S O N

by [The Rev. Theron H. Rice]

Oscar Bickley Wilson was born in Rogersville, Tenn., March 4th, 1860. On his father's side he was the son of Rev. James M. Wilson and the grandson of Rev. Samuel B. Wilson, D.D., of Union Theological Seminary. Through his mother he was descended from the Rev. Thornton Rogers of Albemarle County, Va. When he was only four months old his mother died and the little boy passed into the hands of Mrs. Susan E. Baxter, whom all his friends learned to know as his "dear Aunt Sue." Under her care he grew to manhood. The value which he set upon her motherly nurture comes out in a birthday letter which he wrote her in the year 1892: "Your recurring birthdays always recall to my mind the goodness of God to us in sparing you to us and in such good health, good spirits, and activity as hitherto you have enjoyed. Your life is always a helpful one to my faith, and my dear mother and father in heaven have many a time praised God (I easily believe) that he gave us into your hands to guide and train." He was carried to Albemarle Co., Va., to the home of his grandmother Rogers. Having received careful instruction from his devoted aunt, and in good private schools, he finished his academic course at the University of Virginia. He always loved study and was a laborious and successful student. He taught school two sessions at Wesson, Miss., and two years more in his home community with great satisfaction to patrons and pupils. His cherished desire at this time was to extend by university and foreign study his mental training,

Copied by M. T. S. Library.

and the overmastering desire was a thirst for knowledge, to the attainment of which he was bending every energy of his resolute character.

But at this stage of his career he suffered the loss of his eyesight and for two years he lived, perforce on the farm engaged in manual labor, unable to read even a chapter in the Bible. Those who know how skillfully Mr. Wilson was adjusting the whole system of Stillman Institute to its industrial basis at the time of his death will recognize at once for what God was training his servant. But to him at that time the providence was fearfully dark. He had joined, as a child, the church of his aunt, and throughout his college course he had been a consistent Christian. During these sightless years, however, his faith suffered a terrible eclipse and his struggle with doubt drove him almost to despair. It was a dreadful conflict with the powers of darkness. His cherished plans lay in ruins about his feet and he was shut up to a life of manual drudgery utterly uncongenial to his tastes. He became almost desperate. But out of it all after two years or more devoted to the study of infidel literature and evidences of Christianity, he came victorious, the clear, strong, brave, and sure man of God; and then his mind turned to the ministry.

In the fall of 1886 he entered Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. During his Seminary course he was a great sufferer from dyspepsia and though his ardent love of study supported him in the pursuit of knowledge, his joy in his work and his progress were sorely hindered. Yet under his trials he wrote to his aunt as follows: "The victories over sin which I have had, the daily increasing strength of my faith, and the daily growing love for the Bible and for my duty as God shows it to me, my delightful experiences of gratitude to God, have removed me far from all murmuring and have given me a strong trust in God. I verily believe God will answer my prayer for a faith that will withstand any test -- even death or more than death -- to

the glory of his name. I verily believe this prayer is being answered. And am I satisfied with my present condition? It only increases my earnestness ten-fold -- I am determined - so help me God - to tolerate no sin of which I shall be aware; but to give myself unreservedly to my work."

He finished his Seminary course in 1889, and was licensed to preach by West Hanover Presbytery that summer. His first charge was at Windy Cove and Milboro Churches. Here his labors abounded and evidences of how he drew out the love of that people still abounds. But while faithfully devoting himself to his work even to its minute details, and rejoicing over the growth of his people in grace his letters reveal the fact that another call was ringing in his ears. His mind was turning more and more to the Mission field. He felt he must labor where laborers were few. Under the operation of certain providential facts his plans for the future attained a certain definiteness. He writes: (My) "resolution is that I will not go to any place which already has anything like an adequate supply of ministers. If there is a Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal or Presbyterian pastor within reach of the people, this will determine my movement elsewhere. Also it is quite well settled that I will move somewhere within 18 months --possibly in less time. While there is more to do here than I could do, if I had twice my ability to do and a dozen times my life time to do it in, yet I consider so imperative the Master's orders to let all men know of the Gospel call that I cannot remain here longer than that time. The move, then, will not be postponed much more than 12 months; and further, if not to the foreign field, then it will be to some western village or town or community entirely without the gospel. In other words <u>mission work</u> either at home or abroad. One consideration makes the home field preferable - viz., that now-a-days men are more ready to go abroad than to take the neglected home territory, and

a place where no one else will go will be an attractive place to me. But there are other reasons in favor of the foreign work. Suffice it to say that I am not looking for an 'easy place', nor would I accept one if it were offered." A little later in that year (1892) he writes: "I mailed a letter to Bro. Lapsley asking all about the needs of a man coming there - what his outfit ought to be; and another letter to Dr. Houston, telling him I was ready - if the way opened at the end of the 12 months beginning now - to go to the Congo. This begins to 'look like business.' I have made haste slowly and am still doing so, but when once reached, I am there 'to stay.' I really know of only one thing that will keep me from going - the call to some very hard field on the frontier - to which no other man is ready to go." The Committee did not deem his health robust enough to warrant the appointment to Africa. So the door in that direction was closed by the hand of Divine providence. But he was allowed to have a taste of western frontier work. He left Milboro in 1893 and went to Arkansas under the direction of the Home Mission Committee. He was located at Conway where he labored for two years. While at work among the white people of this field he assayed to preach at times to the negroes, at which some of his white congregation manifested decided displeasure. He felt great surprise. He was unable to conceive how Christians could object to any man giving the gospel to the very people who needed it so sorely. He was frankly told, however, that such was the strength of the prejudice that many white people would not come to hear him preach if he continued to preach to the negroes. He at once resolved that if his connection with a white congregation denied him the privilege of preaching to the negroes he must "get into a position where he could do so."

An opening occurring in our Tuscaloosa Institute he gladly offered himself and thus entered the work for which God had been preparing him. From this time forth his whole being, spirit, soul, and body, his cultivated talents, his strong and resourceful practical sense, his indomitable energy and his rich, Christlike love were poured out as a libation to God on the altar of the negroes sore need. He once said to the writer: "I would not hesitate an instant to die for them." This step - the surrender of his life to this work - roused the protests of his friends. Even his dear Aunt Sue who had given her consent for him to go to Africa quailed before the thought of his taking up and laying down his life for such a work as that of preaching the gospel under existing circumstances to the negroes of our Southern states. Those who knew his fine talents and the future that was assuredly his felt that he was burying his life in an obscure and thankless work.

They even feared social ostracism, and in one instance where he dared to stand for justice to the poor negro in the face of fierce race prejudice blazing at fanatic height, it was suggested to him that he might be killed if he took a stand. (To which suggestion he calmly replied that he was perfectly ready to die.) But the serene and spiritual eye of his lofty soul saw the real nobility of the work. He believed that the less reward we received at the hands of men the more we may assuredly expect at the hands of God. He used to say that it seemed to him that in view of all the elements of the situation of the South the not only lowly but despised character of the race in the eyes of the white people, the odium attached to any man who showed any real affection for them and sought to serve them with his powers and his life - the race antipathies, intensified by the years succeeding the war which must be overcome - the horror we naturally feel at the manifestation of the brutality rampant in some of their

nameless crimes - in view of all these things, mountains of difficulties, that there existed nowhere on earth such an opportunity as confronts us here today to exemplify before a watching world the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. For "ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich." He desired for himself and for his church that mind which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God. But made himself of no reputation and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of man; and being found in fashion as a man he humbles himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." He made precisely the choice of Moses and chose to suffer reproach rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin. Nobly did he encounter and bear the peculiar crosses of his lot. Not everywhere were even ministers of the gospel responsive and sympathetic. At times he became intensely lonely. He shrunk from the many flippant and unfeeling remarks made about the negroes in ordinary conversation. They were to him like some poor weak afflicted deformed child might be to a tender mother. He saw all their deformity but could not laugh or joke about it. He wept over it. He frequently said that the white man with all his privileges was the Dives of the parable and negro with his sores was the beggar Lazarus at our door. He wondered at the lack of compassion which the apathy of white Christians manifested. It was this appalling apathy of the Church which sometimes nearly crushed him with a sense of his work being almost an impossible one. But he had an incomitable spirit and his colossal difficulties drove him to heroic efforts to overcome. He was rarely long cast down. He writes on a day when he was "a little blue" - "My sovereign remedy is a very simple and very old fashioned one indeed - only its application is somewhat peculiar. The remedy is nothing but prayer; its application

the vigor with which I engage." In addition to unusual opposition from without he encountered of course conflicts on the theatre of his own heart. His battles with the evil one in his hours of prayer were fierce indeed. His letters on this subject read like certain passages from Luther's life.

He had his seasons at fasting. He was always abstemious in diet. He would rise early for his morning prayer and brave a cold room in dead of winter without sufficient clothing to keep him warm rather than lose his hour with God before he saw the face of man.

He had a small income, on this he subsisted in a valued independence and gave his services freely, without salary, to the church during the last three years. His life approached an ascetic character, for out of that which was barely sufficient for his modest needs he managed to give something away. Some have charged him with asceticism, but let it be remembered that he did not deny himself, as these errorists did, for the mere sake of inflicting sufferings on the poor body - sufferings which they foolishly imagined meritorious. But he lived so hardly in order to do his work at all, in order to release funds from the scantily furnished treasury for other departments of the work.

Let no one think him a gloomy man. He was remarkably sunny and believed and indulged in a good laugh. His brother remarked after his death that the thing which had impressed him lately was Oscar's overflowing joy in his work.

His death was as remarkable as his life. "He had gone to his boarding house to dinner shortly after 1 o'clock on Monday, April 16th, and was talking through the telephone with Rev. D. Clay Lilly, Secretary. A gentle rain was falling, but no storm was raging, when suddenly there came a terrific flash of lightning, striking the wire, evidently near where he was standing, and killing him instantly. Arrested thus in the busy pursuit of his work, he retained in death

an expression of calm, a most joyous peacefulness.

"On Wednesday, April 18th, in the Presbyterian Church in Tuscaloosa, touching and appropriate services were held, conducted by Rev. Mr. Lilly, assisted by all the ministers of all denominations in town.

"His remains were brought to Virginia, and on Sunday, April 22, they were laid to rest in the cemetery at Oak Level Church, near the home of his brother and aged aunts. Rev. Drs. Laird of Danville, and Johnston of South Boston conducting the simple and beautiful service.

On Sunday morning preceding his death he had preached for Mr. Lilly, choosing as his theme "The Resurrection." Friends present say that he seemed more than usually full of his theme, and preached with great earnestness and tender persuasion.

One of the students of Stillman Institute, in writing to a lady in Alabama of his death, says: "On Monday morning he entered Study Hall in apparent usual health, and opened devotional exercises with the hymn:

"There is a land of pure delight
Where saints immortal reign;
Eternal day excludes the night,
And pleasures banish pain."

"In his Bible lesson he dwelt on the words of the Apostles: 'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith; henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.'

"His last words in the Bible class that morning were: 'Men, if you all expect to preach the gospel of Christ, <u>master the Bible</u>! ' "

From the numerous letters expressing the deep bereavement which his death inflicted on the church at large, only two are selected. The first comes from the pen of one of our most cultivated theological

professors; the other is from one of the negro boys in our tuscaloosa school.

"Richmond, Va., May 1st, 1900.

My dear Thornton:-

I hasten to extend to you my brotherly sympathy in the grief I know you must feel over Oscar's sudden call from among us. I do not know a man who was riper for heaven, and a swift and painless translation like his is a death to be envied, but I know the world will seem lonelier to you after the loss of such a brother. But we can rejoice that not a single ignoble memory mars our recollection of him, and that God gave us such a mind and such a heart for so many years, and showed us close at hand what real purity of soul and what real consecration to Christ are. May we have grace to follow him as he followed Christ.

Affectionately yours,

W. W. Moore."

"Stillman Institute,

Tuscaloosa, Ala., April 16, 1900.

Dear Miss Irene:-

How sad sad to say ---------- I can hardly express it. Prof. O. B. Wilson is dead! Oh, how painful! He was standing at the 'phone today at 1:20 p.m. when a hard clap of thunder and lightning came which was conducted by the telephone wire and killed him almost instantly. He was speaking to Rev. D.C. Lilly, D.D., the secretary of education among the colored. Mr. Lilly felt the force but was not hurt in any wise. He (Prof. Wilson) entered the study hall this morning in apparent usual health, opened the devotional exercises by singing hymn --

"There is a land of pure delight

THE LIBRARY
Union Theological Seminary
RICHMOND, VA.

Where saints immortal reign.

Eternal day excludes the night

And pleasures banish pain."

"Then taking up the lesson in the Holy Bible, he called upon me the first one to recite as I was sitting at the head of the class, and I took particular notice of him dwelling very much upon the passage in 2nd Timothy - where the Apostle Paul said - "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith, henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness.' Though I know he was not conscious of the fact that in a few hours more that he would be called to receive his crown of righteousness.

"Tonight he is leaning in Jesus' everlasting arms. I do not think there will be found another man to do the work here like him. His last words in the Bible class this morning, was 'Men, if you all expect to preach the gospel of Christ, Master the Bible! '

"My respects to you all.

Your obedient servant,

Eddie Gilliard."

It is a question whether there is in all our church one holy and brave and able enough to take his place. But he, as a wise master builder, has laid a foundation. Perhaps others may, by God's grace, build thereon.

His work for the negroes is done, but is ours? When God causes one member of his church, whose spiritual vision is so purified and so clear to discern in an undertaking so much Divine beauty and glory as that he is willing to lay down his life for it for Jesus' sake, can the church at large fail to see in that man's call from God her own call to do the work? When Lapsley fell in Africa, more than one strong man sprung into the breach. Who of our high-

minded, gifted, men (for it requires such) will answer the mute call of that vacant place with a "Here am I, send me."